

CONSTANCE BAKER-MOTLEY

*First African American state senator
and federal judge*



Activist, lawyer, and judge, Constance Baker-Motley was a key legal strategist fighting racial discrimination in the 20th Century, successfully arguing a series of Supreme Court cases before becoming the nation's first federal African-American woman judge.

Motley was born in 1921, in New Haven, Conn., the ninth of 12 children of Caribbean immigrants. Motley got involved in civil rights in high school. After graduating she worked as a maid, lacking funds for college. When she gave a speech at a community center, a white philanthropist offered to fund her studies.

Motley graduated from New York University in 1943. While attending law school at Columbia University, she began working as a law clerk at the NAACP.

After her 1946 marriage and graduation, Motley was hired onto the NAACP's legal defense team, where she became the first African-American woman to argue a case before the Supreme Court. She wrote the original complaint for the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* landmark desegregation case and argued 10 Supreme Court cases, winning nine, including efforts to admit the first black student to the University of Mississippi in 1962 and cases ending segregation in restaurants.

In 1964, Motley became the first African-American woman State Senator and, in 1965, the first woman Manhattan Borough President. In 1966, President Johnson appointed her to the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York, as the nation's first African-American woman federal judge. She served, including a term as Chief Judge, until her death in 2005.

In 2001, President Bill Clinton awarded her the Presidential Citizens Medal. The NAACP awarded her the Spingarn Medal in 2003.

BESSIE A. BUCHANAN

*First African American woman
elected to the NYS Assembly*



Bessie A. Buchanan, a singer, dancer, and silent film actress, was elected to the New York State Legislature in 1954, making her the first African-American woman elected to the Assembly.

Buchanan enjoyed a 15-year theatrical career, starring in the musical "Shuffle Along" and dancing in the Cotton Club's chorus line, before educator Mary McLeod Bethune asked her to work on the 1949 U.S. Senate campaign of Governor Herbert H. Lehman. The experience spurred her political activism.

In the Assembly, Buchanan introduced more than 150 bills, many focusing on civil rights and improving public education and neighborhoods. Later, Buchanan served as the State's Human Rights Commissioner under Governor Nelson Rockefeller.